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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the evolution of an early childhood education program from one that was teacher directed, traditionally structured, and academically oriented to one that was emergent and child centered. The paper discusses how philosophical consensus was established, needed changes were prioritized and implemented, and new ways of thinking were presented to the traditionally trained faculty and to some change-resistant parents. (Author)

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"Clouds Come from New Hampshire": Confronting the Challenge of Philosophical Change in Early Childhood Programs

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Abstract

This paper describes the evolution of an early childhood education program from one that was teacher directed, traditionally structured, and academically oriented to one that was emergent and child centered. The paper discusses how philosophical consensus was established, needed changes were prioritized and implemented, and new ways of thinking were presented to the traditionally trained faculty and to some change-resistant parents.

Introduction

> *The way you activate the seeds of change is by making choices about the results you want to create. When you make a choice, you mobilize vast human energies and resources which otherwise go untapped.... If you limit your choices only to what seems possible or reasonable, you disconnect yourself from what you truly want, and all that is left is a compromise.* (Robert Fritz) *

Few things in life have such a power to immobilize, energize, divide, or unite, as does the process of change. The ease and comfort that can come from doing something because "that's how it has always been done" is undeniable. However, for a growing number of early childhood educators, this perceived comfort is being replaced with a sense of boredom, obsolescence, and feebleness. No longer are the traditional teaching practices involving academics, units, and themes seen as the best ways to reach and empower the children with whom we work. Instead, an approach that values the emergent ideas, cultures, and creativity of young children is being embraced by a growing number of teachers as the best practice in the early childhood classroom.

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While much has been published or proclaimed regarding these new and innovative approaches to early education, traditional nursery school practices do remain alive and well, in part because many of our colleges and universities continue to reinforce these traditional methods in their teacher education programs. Also, the expectations of parents place an additional burden on the early childhood teacher to provide a program that will shape a child capable of reciting facts and constructing "refrigerator art" but often unable to negotiate the day-to-day challenges of solving problems and independent, critical, and creative thinking.

The fact remains that methods do evolve. Certainly, our medical practices have advanced beyond the earliest procedures. Just as certain 16th-century surgical routines have given way to superior 21st-century techniques, so too should our work with young children evolve as we gain greater understanding of the ways in which children learn.

Our school began such a process of change three years ago, although truth be told the process had really been in motion for years before that. As the quote by Robert Fritz intimates, our journey has not been without its support and opposition, and it has, at times, taken tremendous stretches in our own thinking as well as a little compromising. Through it all, the willingness to pick ourselves up, remain flexible, and hold a goal in mind has kept the process in motion. Here is our story.

A Process of Change Unfolds: The Program

> *The great thing in this world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving.*
> (Oliver Wendell Holmes)

It was a rainy day in September. The previous night a very loud and brilliant thunderstorm had blown into northern California. It was possibly the fiercest storm to hit the area in the lifetime of our young children. As we met together on the morning following the storm, the excitement level was high, and individual experiences were related with unbridled enthusiasm! The children shared with each other and the teachers their understanding of what had happened the previous night. Many presumptions were tossed about, some embraced and some discarded. An outside observer would have heard that:

- The lightning is in a bolt, and then the thunder is booming after.
- Clouds make rain, and wind makes the clouds move.
- Sometimes lightning comes and sometimes not. And the rain always keeps the flowers growing.
- Clouds are made from fluff, and fluff is made from feathers.
- God lives in the clouds, and the moon lives in the clouds, too!
- Sometimes, if you throw water up to the sun, it goes into the clouds and then it rains.
- My mommy told me that if the noise doesn't come for a while that means it is far, far away.
- I think the lightning comes from the moon and makes it really loud and bright.
- *I know that the clouds come from New Hampshire.*

For the next few weeks, a revolving group of children in the classroom was engaged in various, self-directed explorations of storms and clouds. Later, as we met to discuss the work of the children, we took time to revisit questions we had asked ourselves many times: How did we get to the place at which we could stop and *really* listen to the children? Why did we value this capability as an essential part of our program? Yet the most important question we

revisited that day was: Where did we come from, and where are we going next?

A Traditional, Teacher-Directed Environment

> *The American ideal, after all, is that everyone should be as much alike as possible.* (James Baldwin)

The Early Childhood Program at Phillips Brooks School had its start in 1975. It evolved from a traditional program that was teacher planned and implemented into one in which the children construct their own learning. In 1975, it seemed that early childhood programs either chose a philosophy that was based on the work of Maria Montessori or a philosophy that was academically oriented, stressing rote learning. Although not Montessori trained, we found the lure of the carefully crafted wooden materials and the dedication of Montessori's many advocates difficult to resist. What emerged was a program that combined the materials and the dedication of a Montessori program with the comfort and the security of a traditional academic program. Our carefully crafted program was successful in an environment that was created by the melding of a traditional and parochial school, which was founded and housed in a parish complex. There was no reason to question the veracity of the program for the next several years. The preschool provided a stepping-stone into the elementary grades. It also filled a community need for a thoughtful and well-organized early childhood program. It was successful financially, met the needs of the families in the parish, and was never reevaluated.

Over the ensuing years, the results of studies on how children learn were published and widely accepted. However, in a school that had been founded upon and historically functioned in a traditional, teacher-led philosophical environment, there was no serious thought given to changing the approach to educating children. Change is work. Change means admitting that what one has always done may be improved upon. Change is frightening. Change was not an option.

A Time of Transition

> *Lots of folks confuse bad management with destiny.* (Kin Hubbard)

By the late 1980s, there had been an amazing number of studies published and widely circulated about the way a human brain develops, the way children learn and understand and interpret information, and how lifelong learners are nurtured in the early years of development. The director of the program and some members of the staff considered many methods of working with children during these years. However, there was no consistency within the teaching staff, many of whom were part time, and the idea of reinventing the ways of working with children was not viable. Some new ideas were tried, such as mixed-age grouping and individualized planning that considered each child's developmental level, but parent and administration pressure to stay with the tried, the true, and the secure was immense.

In the early 1990s, the school was approaching a time of transition, but the resistance to change was stronger than the desire of some and the ability of others to initiate change. By this time, themes had become the guiding principle of our early childhood program. These themes were teacher conceived, planned, and executed. The parents loved the lavish displays created in the classroom. Each year, the space was turned into an Amazon Rain Forest with

papier-mâché animals hanging from 12-foot-high cardboard trees. One year, the third grade and the preschool combined efforts and put on a play written by the children and presented to the families and the rest of the school. This effort was met with a directive that the upper grades were not to spend time with the preschool. The reason given was that while we could afford to be "whimsical," the children in kindergarten through sixth grade needed to be concerned with academics. At this point, the kindergarten was removed from the Primary Department and made a part of our lower school (kindergarten through third grade). The preschool was considered a stepping-stone into the elementary school but an unimportant educational experience. The frustration level on the part of the director and staff was intense.

The Early Learning Center

In 1997, the founding school head retired, and a new leader was hired following a nationwide search. This new head had been instrumental in implementing an innovative pre-kindergarten program at her former school. She brought with her a great appreciation for our program and our goals. She was eager to help establish a place for us as contributing members of the school and understood the value of the changes we had been attempting to initiate. She brought with her an early childhood teacher from her former school. He proved to be a multi-talented teacher with boundless energy, a passion for children, and an amazing amount of creative ability. He and the director were given the opportunity to attend the Winter Study Session in Reggio Emilia, and their experience changed forever the course of the Early Learning Center at Phillips Brooks School.

A new living and working environment was created, with forethought and careful planning. Each area offered unique learning opportunities and exploration possibilities. Situations were set up that needed solutions, and the staff was trained to recognize opportunities for learning when they occurred, by plan or by chance, and to enable the experiences necessary to facilitate the understanding process.

The Early Learning Center was given the freedom to hire staff who were philosophically in tune with the emerging program. The first result of this change was the hiring of an experienced teacher found through the Reggio Emilia listserv who was relocating from the Midwest and was looking for a program very much like the one that had been created at Phillips Brooks School. The returning staff attended the summer Reggio Institute in Denver, during the next two summers. Everyone became enthused about and dedicated to the program, which was renamed the Early Learning Center at Phillips Brooks School.

The Early Learning Center had become a child-centered early childhood program with an emergent curriculum. The influence of Reggio Emilia was evident, but the program was unique to the history that preceded it, the school of which it was a very active and important part, the people involved in creating it, and the families it served. The transition was not an easy one. Many roadblocks were put in the way, but with persistence and determination and an unshakable faith in the emerging program, we found ways to go over, under, or around them all, without compromising our strongly held beliefs.

Advocating and Negotiating: Faculty/Administration/Board of Trustees

All big changes in human history have been arrived at slowly and through many compromises.
(Eleanor Roosevelt)

A few of the members of our faculty that remained after the assumption of leadership by the new director were unprepared for, and resistant to, any additional change. Suddenly, expectations were increased, responsibilities were shared by all, and change became a way of life. Fear was the dominant emotion felt during this time: "Will I measure up?"; "Will I have to do a lot more work?"; "Will the ways I have always taught be valued?"; "What will be expected of me?"

The Board of Trustees had worked with only one Head of School. The board was committed to reassuring all members of the school community that the strengths that had made the school a successful and sought-after institution of learning in the elementary years would not be "tossed out" in the process of change and growth. Leadership styles vary as much as learning styles, and all were questioning what was to come. Would we be asked to forsake our Episcopalian roots? Would Christianity no longer be the religion of choice, although others were welcomed and recognized? Would the history and tradition of the school be ignored? Each step of the evolutionary process was examined and reexamined with ponderous attention to detail. Each step was met with resistance by some and with jubilation by others. The excitement about the future grew as the process evolved.

One symbol of *change* was the Early Learning Center. Even the name was different. Does nothing remain constant? The environment was white and pristine, well planned with a purpose behind every area and every type of material available to the children, free of clutter and confusion—a truly beautiful space in which to display the ongoing work of the children as well as the documentation of their completed work. This environment was created out of the old and inadequate space that had been messy at its best. The amount of work that it took to create the environment was obvious and frightening to teachers of other grade levels who were afraid that they would be expected to duplicate it. Of course, they were not. One's own working space is as individual as one's home and the way one attires oneself. Some comments that came back to us, usually indirectly, were openly disdainful of the changes.

The Evolving Thoughts and Feelings of Parents

Anticipating Parents' Reactions

> *Fear is that little darkroom where negatives are developed.* (Michael Pritchard)

It is well documented that each person's response to change is different. And in the best of situations, "change is a given." Throughout our process of change, it felt important to bear in mind that every person's response to change is unique, and change often elicits fear. We suspected that our changing educational philosophy and program might stir up fears in some of our parents, and thus we approached the situation in as proactive a way as was possible. We did expect parents to have questions and concerns, and so we were not surprised when we started observing and experiencing this predictable and healthy reaction.

We looked first at the possible reasons that our parent body might fear a change in our program. Our goal was to take the parent perspective in an attempt to gain a greater empathy and understanding of the ways in which we might lead parents into a different way of thinking and being. It seemed likely that parents might be uncomfortable with change for a variety of reasons:

- *Parents wonder what was wrong with the old way of doing things.* To our parents, change may have meant that we believed that "the old way of doing things was not as desirable as the new and improved way." So did "new and improved" mean that we had been teaching their child in ways that were not effective? If the answer to this question were yes, we wondered how parents could trust that the new way of teaching would not one day be thought to have its own shortcomings. It seemed imperative that this possible fear be addressed in a very honest and informative manner. The idea should be to point out where and how certain traditional principles of teaching would be maintained and why and how innovative practices lend support to what is already working.

- *Parents are accustomed to product vs. process programs.* We realized that parents feel proud of what their young child can do. When their preschooler comes home from school with a paper that shows he or she can read, write, and calculate, parents are impressed and pleased. When a program emphasizes the underlying process of learning, parents no longer get to hold the results in their hands and thus are unable to mail results to grandma and grandpa or display results on the front of the refrigerator for all to see. This lack of observable results can be viewed as a loss. To alleviate this loss, we felt it important to teach parents how to look for a different kind of result, a result that is not always easily captured by paper and pencil but rather observed in their child's interactions. A goal was to teach parents how to observe and value their child's ability to solve problems, communicate, observe, listen, make decisions, delay gratification, cooperate, be kind, etc. Additionally, we strove to provide parents with literature that supported the importance of these observable skills.

- *Parents may not know where or how they fit into the new program.* We believed that with a program change comes a role change for parents. We expressed a desire to provide opportunities for parents to both observe and participate in a variety of ways during the school day.

- *Parents want to make sure this change is not a passing trend.* The pendulum swings, and what goes around comes around. Wise people are suspicious of change for the sake of change or for the sake of a passing trend. We felt it critical to articulate why and how our program was changing and to reassure parents that this change was trend-free. Our goal was to continue to bring parents back to a common ground—the mutual desire to create children who love to learn and learn to love.

- *Parents fear their child will not succeed academically.* Most parents were raised within a traditional educational model. Perhaps the most rumored and openly verbalized fear was that parents felt that their children would not succeed academically because they were not being taught in a familiar and traditional manner. This fear was predictable and understandable and one we chose to address openly through parent-teacher discussions and during one-on-one conversations.

While our list might not have covered every possibility, it certainly helped us to identify with those parents and then begin to develop a means to help them through the transition.

Helping Parents Deal with Change

Do not be too timid and squeamish about your actions. All life is an experiment. (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

One of our first actions was to initiate a series of evening roundtable discussions. We hoped that these would serve two very important purposes. The first was to give us an opportunity to describe and demonstrate what the program changes meant in the day-to-day lives of the children in our program. Through a series of role-plays, teachers described how and what the children were learning. Over time, our parent's body language, questions, and comments grew to look and sound more supportive and comfortable with our educational philosophy. Initially, we knew that parents were "talking" and were not "on board" with what we were doing. Parents asked questions such as, "Will my child still learn how to read?" and made similar fear-based comments such as, "My brother's child is bringing home homework, and our son is not." Our commitment and compassion began to reflect success as the questions and comments of the parents changed, suggesting the parents increased understanding and support of what we were pursuing in the Early Learning Center.

This year, parents were given an index card and asked to write one goal for their child for the school year. These goals were written privately so that each parent felt a sense of privacy and confidence that they had a voice. Parent's goals for their children are often a reflection of how our present parent body accepts and supports our shift in philosophy. Previously, parents had primarily *academic or product-based goals* for their child. It would not have been uncommon to see, "I want my child to learn how to read or write." Now, parents' goals for their child seem more process based, suggested by words such as, "I hope that my child will learn how to make friends and solve problems."

We are grateful that the majority of our parent body has grown supportive and comfortable with our educational philosophy. We also understand and expect that parent-teacher relationships will always be an integral part of our program. Guiding parents through change takes time, education, and immense understanding.

The Evolution of Experiences: The Children

Creative activity could be described as a type of learning process where teacher and pupil are located in the same individual. (Arthur Koestler)

Undeniably, we live in a world of "isms." While some of these "isms" are positive, many more are not. Racism, sexism, and ageism have received much of our attention in recent years with tremendous amounts of energy being poured into their abatement. The "ism," however, that teachers—and all adults for that matter—must become sensitive to is that of adultism.

In simplest terms, adultism refers to the practice of creating a world that discounts the child. We see it all around us—in public restrooms containing only adult-sized fixtures, classrooms with counters and other workspaces too tall for the children who use them, common household implements too large for capable, small hands to utilize, and military and other "adult" budgets far larger than that spent on the education and well-being of our children. Adultism reflects an adult-centered world where expectations of children's abilities are greatly underestimated. As early childhood educators, the opportunity exists to move away from an adult-centered world to one that emerges from the child. We recognized this opportunity as the origin of our philosophical evolution, and remaining "ever aware" has helped to guide our process of change.

In our earlier thematic and academic days, we saw a classroom bustling with activity. There were a few "activity centers" with some open-ended, but mostly single-purpose, materials. The real opportunities for creativity were to come in the form of children constructing elaborate "sets" to reflect the theme of the moment. There were always a few "good children" willing to follow our explicit instructions in order to construct some necessary elements. However, the interest would always begin to wane, and we would find ourselves subtly demanding participation. The role of "teacher-turned-warden" was an exhausting proposition. The end of the day was usually much awaited. Initially, we examined this problem from the perspective of the *unwilling child*. How could we constantly be bringing in children who needed so much direction and guidance? It was not until we began to pay attention to the cutting-edge work of local and international educators that we began to suspect that the *unwilling child* was actually the *unmotivated child*—a child uninterested and unwilling to pursue our teacher-initiated and directed activities. Following a trip abroad to study innovative early learning methods, we returned to the classroom in "observation mode." We saw, heard, and experienced things that had previously gone unnoticed. Our first breakthrough came just a few weeks later.

On a walk through our campus, the children noticed many hummingbirds hovering near flowers or landing in branches of the trees. We stopped to discuss what they noticed about the birds, to gain a sense of their understanding. Out of the conversation, we learned that the children believed that hummingbirds loved red and beautiful things, liked to play, and ate flowers. They wanted to entice the birds closer to our classroom. In the ensuing weeks, we discussed ways to accomplish this goal. It was suggested that a playground with "eating places" would be just what we needed. They began to graphically design this playground, showing all the parts they felt were essential to make the birds happy. Construction began after careful combining of the best parts of all the many ideas. This project continued for eight weeks with intense excitement and participation. No longer did the teachers need to push children into activities; the children were intrinsically motivated. Another interesting occurrence was noted: the children were measuring, counting, solving problems, creating, negotiating, drawing, and planning without need of teacher-directed activities or worksheets. These were our goals for the children, and they were creating the opportunities to hone these skills themselves!

It is two years later. We have studied and created clouds, rainbows, and tree houses; examined in detail our bellybuttons and faces; and theorized about the lives of dogs and snails. Our objectives have changed. Now, our goal is to nurture a creative, independent, social child. The academics will come. What we have done in the process benefits both the child and the teacher. We learn with them; we experience with them; we emerge with them. There is no safety in what we do. We must always be prepared for the unexpected. We, also, cannot wait to get to school each day! We are committed to the idea of a classroom as a pallet of raw material waiting to be spread and shaped. The children display excitement and wonder daily. They are fluent in many artistic languages, and they invigorate the lives of the teachers with whom they work.

A Process "In Process"

You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. What you'll discover will be wonderful. What you'll discover will be yourself. (Alan Alda)

From the conception of the Early Learning Center program in 1975, through the quiet years of stagnation, and into the turmoil of change, there has been one common goal. That goal has been to create an environment in which children can feel safe, can feel loved, and can explore the world around them. We may not always have understood how to best fulfill these needs. We may not always have made the best choices. However, we never stopped searching, and we never stopped trying.

Just as a child is never a finished product, neither is our early childhood program. In the past three years, with the advent of new leadership, new enthusiasm, and new knowledge, we have been able to move rapidly toward our ideal. However, we will never stop looking for ways to improve. We will never stop studying and exploring. We will never give up our ideals. We will always put children first.

The great French Marshall Lyautey once asked his gardener to plant a tree. The gardener objected that the tree was slow growing and would not reach maturity for 100 years. The Marshall replied, "In that case, there is no time to lose; plant it this afternoon!" (John F. Kennedy)

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Note

*Quotations are taken from *Do It! Let's Get Off Our Buts*, by John Roger and Peter McWilliams (Prelude Press, 1991).

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